

VZCZCXRO8900
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHVJ #1766/01 2251459
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 131459Z AUG 07
FM AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6845
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/JCS WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SARAJEVO 001766

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/10/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [HR](#) [BK](#)

SUBJECT: BOSNIA-THE TREBINJE WILDFIRES, A STUDY IN BAD
GOVERNANCE

Classified By: DCM Judith B. Cefkin for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

1. (SBU) Ambassador discussed the recent series of fires with local officials in Trebinje where a large number of blazes and outdated equipment had hindered firefighting. The problem was compounded by the failure of State-level institutions, including the Presidency, to provide guidance and address the emergency effectively. Only the Ministry of Defense took appropriate action to aid in the firefighting effort. A political dispute over entity and state-level competencies in the field of civil protection also hindered Bosnia and Herzegovina's ability to effectively fight the fires along its border with Croatia. Republika Srpska (RS) authorities refused to accept badly needed firefighting equipment because it was offered through the state level Department of Civil Protection. NATO is working with state and Entity level civil protection authorities to forge a compromise draft of a stalled state level Law on Protection and Rescue which would establish a nationwide emergency response system. The fire situation in Bosnia appears to be improving with most, but not all, blazes extinguished. END SUMMARY

Ambassador in Trebinje

2. (C) On August 10 Ambassador traveled to Trebinje and toured fire damaged areas around Poljice near the Croatian and Montenegrin borders. A local firefighter gave Ambassador a detailed account of the unprecedented recent series of fires. The firefighter said this years fire season was the worst he had seen in his 27 year career with over 106 fires reported this month alone, compared to 60 fires all last year. Although firefighters were able to prevent any deaths or major property damage, 10,000 hectares had burned. Two active fires in the western part of Trebinje municipality were still burning but were not threatening property according to the firefighter.

3. (C) The fires around Trebinje started on August 3 when a fire from the south converged with one from the east. The Trebinje fire department has only 18 firefighters and 15 twenty-year-old vehicles, and the nearest assistance is the fire department in Neum 100 kilometers to the west. The Trebinje department was also called upon to combat fires 50 kilometers away in Ravno, which has no fire department. Along with a shortage of manpower and modern equipment, landmines hindered firefighting efforts. In Gola Glavica, for example, hundreds of mines exploded due to the fire. The

firefighter speculated that eighty percent of the fires were caused by arson. At present all fires have been extinguished in the eastern part of Trebinje, he said.

14. (C) The firefighter stated that Trebinje had received no international assistance, but that the Bosnian army had provided important assistance in battling the fires. In response to the Ambassador's offer of U.S. help the firefighter said that the most pressing need is for water tank trucks. Firefighters in Bosnia, Croatia and Montenegro were preoccupied with their own fires and had not been able to engage in any major cross border cooperation. However, limited cooperation did occur on a smaller scale such as when a Croatian fire brigade aircraft dropped water on the fires in Trebinje. He said that firefighters on all sides of the border were ready to cooperate, but politicians were preventing effective cooperation. The firefighter said the Trebinje fire department received Stability Pact-sponsored regional training in 2003 with Croatian and Montenegrin firefighters.

Presidency Abdicates Responsibility

15. (C) On August 6, the Presidency declared a state of emergency in response to the wild fires, but failed to give any further direction on how to handle the disaster. Acting on his own Minister of Defense Selmo Cikotic signed a general order allowing the use of military forces to help local firefighters. Following Cikotic's departure for vacation, Deputy Defense Minister Igor Crnadak coordinated the effort with eastern RS municipal officials, who called him personally asking for assistance. Crnadak told us that local military officials were also being contacted by local

SARAJEVO 00001766 002 OF 003

civilian officials and provided assistance based on the general order signed by MoD Cikotic. Several Defense Ministry officials criticized the Tri-Presidency for its failure to recognize the scope of the problem and organize an effective BiH-wide response, instead, leaving it to defense ministry officials to decide what needed to be done.

Ethnic Politics Hinders Fire Response

16. (SBU) Difficult terrain and a lack of firefighting equipment initially contributed to RS officials' inability to control the fire. However, RS unwillingness to recognize the role of state level civil protection authorities hindered the delivery of equipment and additional manpower. When the Ministry of Security's Department for Civil Protection received a donation of badly-needed firefighting equipment from the Danish government via NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordinating Committee, we are told the RS refused to accept it via state level channels requesting instead that NATO deliver it directly to the RS. Assistant Minister of Security for Civil Protection Samir Agic lamented that conflicts between municipal governments in the RS and Federation had slowed disaster response, but attributed the current crisis to unwillingness by RS authorities to accept state level assistance.

Emergency Response System Needed

17. (C) Since early 2006 a working group of state and entity civil protection experts has been drafting a state Law on Protection and Rescue that would establish a national response mechanism and codify the role of the state Department for Civil Protection in emergencies. The RS blocked this process, objecting to the transfer of competencies from the Entity to the State. NATO supported a conference in April 2007 designed to reinvigorate the process, and it produced a draft law, but the RS also rejected this proposal on the same grounds. In the wake of

this year's fire disaster, NATO hopes to broker a revised compromise agreement that also covers fire disasters. NATO has written to RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik seeking his cooperation in creating a functional state-level emergency response system.

Bosnia-Croatia Coordination

18. (SBU) Dunja Jevak, DCM at the Croatian Embassy in Sarajevo, explained that a Bosnia-Croatia bilateral agreement on cross-border crisis cooperation exists and provides the legal framework for addressing the current problem. However, she claimed that local Bosnian disaster response officials were either unresponsive or unwilling to cooperate and that poor inter-entity cooperation further hindered disaster response. Jevak told us that Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader wrote a letter expressing his concern over the fires to his Bosnian counterpart Nikola Spiric and she was still awaiting the "constructive response" promised by Spiric's office. Despite the fires, Spiric declined to return early from his vacation on the Croatian coast and remained out of the country for most of the disaster. To date, the sole action by the Council of Ministers to address the obvious shortcomings of the national fire response has been to establish a bilateral Bosnian-Croatian working group to review problems that arose during the disaster.

Comment

19. (C) Bosnia's poorly coordinated response to the fires highlights the dangers inherent in the hamstrung and ineffectual state level government. It also underscores the urgent need for an effective country-wide disaster response mechanism. Although the Ministry of Defense stepped forward on an ad hoc basis to play a crucial role in combating the fire, the Presidency and other branches of national government failed completely to mount a credible, or even coherent, response. RS determination to avoid setting precedents that could presage transfers of any competencies to the state caused RS officials to risk lives and property by refusing of badly needed assistance. Trebinje mayor Dobroslav Cuk seemed much more concerned with protecting his political equities and had only a vague grasp of the details and scope of the wildfires threatening his city. To date,

SARAJEVO 00001766 003 OF 003

few Bosnian commentators have pointed out how ethnic politics and widespread disdain for the national government almost resulted in tragedy. However, post intends to ensure that this message is heard publicly and privately. End Comment
MCELHANEY